

S k i n (i n N i n e S t r i p s)
b y R o b e r t R . M o n r o e

... f o r J

I. Letters

And even though we see each other every weekend, speak to each other every night through various electronic mediums and live only half an hour apart, she still sends me letters. Her letters come written on small stationary in envelopes made from maps or magazine covers. She does not send me news of her family or words of greeting from her friends. She sends love letters. Small, gentle sentences of thanks, praise, and simple wonderful confessions. In one such letter she included a photograph of me and her, printed onto red vellum. The picture is tight on us; our foreheads pressed together, our smiles and eyes locked. We are the dark places on a sheet of crimson.

II. Vellum

She prints the picture onto red translucent vellum. A crisp material, more plastic than paper, firm and fragile, promising to become brittle with age. Vellum, before adoption into the world of arts and crafts, before made synthetic for mass production, was a parchment created from the skins of sheep, calves and goats. Unlike leather, tradition vellum looked exactly like what it was: dried, stretched out skin, a material only appropriate for the most dangerous grimoires or grotesque of histories.

III. Red

Red is the color of hearts and cupid's arrowheads, of seduction and her first prom dress, of lipstick she does not look good in, of hives caused by any of her numerous food allergies, the color of her favorite shoes, of the ink she never wants to write in, of caution and danger, of warmth and birth, of blood and cute summer tops, of the sunsets she asks me to look at and the disappointment when I tell her that all sunsets look alike, of dashboard lights out to ruin our vacations and digital clocks on bedsides, of burning lust.

IV. Black

We are the black ink, the dark markings in the scarlet, and the patterns with meanings beyond and without all language. Secret writings in visible images. A code. The signifier and the signified. In this image her hair is black, not the mousy brown of reality or the multicolored remains of experiments into outward identity. My face is darkened by a gradient of three days' growth, a badge of my laziness and distaste for troublesome male hygienic maintenance. Only our skin is red, red as the sky, red as the empty space, red as the air that ripples around us.

V. Driveway

I cannot remember who took the photograph though I have the vague memory of her holding the digital camera in her hand, stretched out as far as it can go, her eyes flickering from mine to the lens, estimating, hoping the picture comes out right. What I am sure of, in spite of the mere sliver of background, is that the photograph was taken in the driveway outside her home. More specifically it is where I park my car every time I visit her, the spot her family has given me, the spot her father has marked with a small reflective arrow, the spot where we say goodnight and goodbye and shiver in winter. I have a specific seat at their table and a specific place in their driveway. A specific place to say goodbye.

VI. Hair

We have cut our hair short. Hers rests on her shoulders, missing the inches she wore through high school, still long enough to be plainly feminine but more witty and daring than hair that is simply long. Mine is growing back from a recent shaving, a trait, like her shorter hair, that marks my ascension from high school. I cannot allow my hair to grow too long for reasons I can only describe as being pseudo-spiritual. One becomes vain with long hair, buys products he does not need, pays outrageous sums for the most transient fashions. She rubs my head when my hair has grown past the stage of Velcro and sandpaper into a texture of velvet. She runs her palms along my scalp, tells me she likes my hair and winks.

VII. Noses

We have mismatched noses, hers broadcasting a Mediterranean heritage and mine miniature by sheer luck. They fit well when we kiss and when we whisper secrets into each others' lips. Her nose makes her beautiful, gives her face balance and character and strength. While my small nose sometimes makes me look like a child, hers is mature and natural. There is a lie going around in the cities and in the air that beauty lies in symmetry, that the face of a beautiful woman can be graphed with triangles and squares, with ratios and proportions. Beauty is in the arch of a broken nose, in the novel face, in those who dare to break the laws of mathematics.

VIII. Smiles

I cannot control my facial expressions. I do my best to make appropriate faces for my inappropriate imitations of movie stars, but my face is more misguided than my voice. Even when looking directly into a mirror I can barely direct my face into states of calculated contortion. And this is why I hate smiling for photographs, to simulate an emotion for an inanimate object. The skin of my face felt right and appropriate while her father photographed us before our second prom, the one I would enjoy. *Don't be so stoic*, he tells me. I cannot hope to convince a lens of my happiness, but in this photograph my smile is genuine. My smile is a reflection, projected to another face and another mouth, a smile in which I invest my sanity and stability. A smile that sends vibrations into the back of my skull.

IX. Skin

I go days without touching another human being, without making the most practical and primitive contact. I live in isolation for days on end, separated from the skin of others by walls of infinite air. But on those days or nights when I am able to pull away from these institutions and their demands I am able to connect with her skin, the softest skin I will ever touch. A lover's skin is flesh and ether. A lover's skin is alien in that it feels like no other skin, not even your own, but so familiar in that it feels more like home than any building, furniture or landscape. In the small line of connection between our foreheads there is a current of electricity that turns, leaps out of the ink and vellum into my hands and eyes, and coats my skin.